

Lepage Rolls Out New Welfare Reforms

Local News

Should Mainers be using welfare benefits to buy alcohol, tobacco and lottery tickets? If Governor LePage has his way they won't be. LePage introduced four new bills he hopes will help crack down on welfare fraud in Maine.

"Everybody in their lifetime will go through a period where they hit a bump in the road or may need some help. I want to be the first one in line to help, but I don't want to be taken advantage of," LePage told reporters at a Monday morning press briefing.

The governor's new plan would prohibit Mainers who use the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs from using those cash benefits to buy alcohol, tobacco, lottery tickets or use them for bail money.

The plan would also prohibit people from using Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards out of state and require job ready TANF recipients to look for work prior to receiving benefits.

According to DHHS data, in one 18-month span more than \$1.5 million was spent out of state using Maine issued EBT cards. During a separate 6 month span, more than 500 people made 2,600 transactions totaling another \$830,000.

"We can eliminate all of these transactions with legislation that does not allow out of state purchases," said DHHS Commissioner Mary Mayhew.

The governor said authorities are also seeing EBT cards being traded for drugs. As a result, LePage plans to put pictures of TANF recipients on their EBT cards, something he does not need legislative approval to do.

LePage introduced the bills with House Republican Leader Ken Fredette who sponsors two of the welfare bills introduced Monday. Both LePage and Fredette fired back at critics who accuse Republicans of waging a war on poor people.

"So Republicans understand poverty, many of us have lived poverty, and these bills are not aimed at hurting or discouraging or disparaging people in poverty," Fredette told reporters. "It's about resources and a culture of moving Maine forward and identifying the importance of having a good work ethic if you're able bodied."

The proposals are drawing heat from Democrats and advocates for the poor who are calling them pure

political stunts.

“Most families work hard and try to follow the rules. These policies just create more obstacles that will burden low income families as they try to move forward,” said Sara Gagne-Holmes, Executive Director of Maine Equal Justice Partners.

Democratic leaders seemed willing to listen on some of the measures. “Democrats are not interested in, nor have ever supported, these funds going to buy alcohol, cigarettes and bail and lottery tickets. That’s absurd,” said House Speaker Mark Eves.

But Eves says they remain opposed to the work search provisions which he says hurts families fleeing domestic violence by delaying TANF benefits.

“One in four families fleeing domestic violence are going to be required to go through this,” Eves said.

“This is a proposal that is out of touch with those families in crisis who are just trying to get on their feet.”

The four bills will get a public hearing in the Health and Human Services Committee Tuesday.